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How Cornerstone Changed My Teaching, Story 3

Doug Shaw
University of Northern Iowa

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How Cornerstone Changed My Teaching, Story 3

Part of the journal section “Forum: Cornerstone” [Contribution to Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community]

Doug Shaw, “How Cornerstone Changed My Teaching”

When I started as a mathematics professor at the University of Northern Iowa, I was the “teaching radical” in my department. I was using the newest techniques, and I knew The Way. After a dozen years had passed, I had become a fuddy-duddy, set in his ways, and hadn’t really realized it. My “newest techniques” weren’t that new, nor had I really examined them in years, while some other professors in the department were experimenting with the real cutting edge in mathematics instruction.

Cornerstone put me in an environment where, for the first time since my first year of graduate school, I was the new person. I still had my magnificent skills, but some of them didn’t apply to this new type of non-math course, and the rest of them required me to really think about how they applied to teaching oral and written communications along with first-year content. During our extensive training, I was involved in very deep, high-level discussions of content and pedagogy with masters in the field.

Things that people in the communication game consider “basic” were things I’d never used. For example, I had never written a rubric before. There were times where I disagreed with what people were saying, but the conversations made me a more thoughtful teacher, regardless of when I was and was not convinced. And I usually was.

I was most changed by a talk, early on, on the composition of UNI’s first year students. I’ve been interacting with them for years, and won an award for my Liberal Arts Core (LAC) teaching, but I didn’t know (for example) how many of them were first-generation college students, and what their attitudes were. I hadn’t taken that into account before, and now I could.

It also was gratifying how my skills from teaching in the sciences informed my practice in Cornerstone, and presumably affected my colleagues. I felt that my perspective, often different from theirs, was respected by most of them, and certainly appreciated. I’d never had such rich conversations about teaching first-year students.

When I teach mathematics now, I no longer take for granted that students know how to study and realize how things are done in college. I’m now aware that when a student comes into my office to argue about a grade, while that student knows that such an action is possible, many of my

students who DO have legitimate questions or issues just aren't aware they can come in my office and argue the point.

I now make sure that my students understand how the game is played – what office hours mean, and how serious I am that they can make appointments to see me otherwise. I am much clearer in my expectations for homework assignments, quizzes, and tests.

I believe Cornerstone is an excellent course, and I learned a lot from my time in it. I have a newfound appreciation for the types of things my colleagues who teach Written and Oral communication do when they teach, and I've made serious friendships with people who, in addition to just being friends with me, are now valuable resources with whom I can discuss the practice of teaching. I am proud of my work with Cornerstone, honored that I was invited to be a part of it, and recommend the experience of teaching it to all of my colleagues, as it becomes an established and important part of the first-year student experience at the University of Northern Iowa.

[Go to the narrative [Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community](#) article.]



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